

# Let Them Blog: Using Weblogs to Advance Literacy in the K-12 Classroom<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

As Internet technologies continue to bloom, understanding the behaviors of its users remain paramount for educational settings. For teachers, parents, school administrators and policy makers, learning *what types* of activities and applications students are using on the Internet is only the surface – understanding *how* they are using these applications can provide innovative strategies for learning environments.

Previously, many scholars have explored how Internet users communicate and present themselves online, using computer-mediated communication venues such as email, chat rooms, instant messaging, newsgroups, multi-user domain (MUDs) and personal home pages to examine communication patterns, online identity construction, and even gender differences (Crystal, 2001; Döring, 2002; Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003; Herring, 2000; Lee, 2003; Turkle, 1995; Witmer & Katzman, 1997).

Internet technologies continue to evolve, and it is important for scholars to examine the latest CMC arenas in comparison with past research in hopes of finding new ways to find creative learning solutions and enhance pedagogical method in educational technology. Weblogs, commonly referred to as *blogs*, represent one of the latest advances in CMC.

A blog can be simply defined as a online journal. Made up of reversed chronological entries infused with text, images or multimedia, blogs embody a place where individual expression and online community development coexist. Not only do the authors, or *bloggers*, post thoughts and feelings on a web page for the world to view, but blog readers can comment, creating a dialogue between the blogger and the community he inhabits. Furthermore, bloggers link to other bloggers, creating an interwoven, and perhaps interdependent, online community of writers and readers. Blog popularity continues to resonate throughout the media, with many scholars suggesting an evolution in individual self-expression, education and research, online journalism, and knowledge management (Alterman, 2003; Blood, 2003; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004; Lasica, 2003; Moore, 2003; Mortenson & Walker, 2002; Oravec, 2002; Pollard, 2003b; Schroeder, 2003).

In a recent survey, *Perseus Development Corporation* found that among the four million published weblogs, almost 53% are created by children and adolescents between

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ages 13 – 19 (Henning, 2003). With such a strong population of young bloggers, understanding its potential uses within a classroom remains an exciting prospect for educators and parents. Can blogs be used to enhance learning? In what ways can they be used in the classroom?

This chapter hypothesizes that blogs can be effective educational tools in the following ways: 1) they promote verbal and visual literacy through dialogue and storytelling; 2) they allow opportunities for collaborative learning; and 3) they are accessible and equitable to a variety of age groups and developmental stages in education.

In order to evaluate this hypothesis, this chapter will proceed as follows: First, it will provide a thorough explanation of what blogs are, fundamental blog features, how they are used and the demographics of the blog population. Second, this chapter will define verbal, visual and digital literacy, and their importance in learning. Third, it will explain how blogs foster literacy through storytelling and peer collaboration. Fourth, this chapter will describe examples where blogs are used in K-12 classrooms, with an emphasis on the previous concepts of storytelling, peer collaboration and literacy. Finally, this chapter will provide specific recommendations for educators and school administrators interested in implementing blogs in their schools and classrooms.

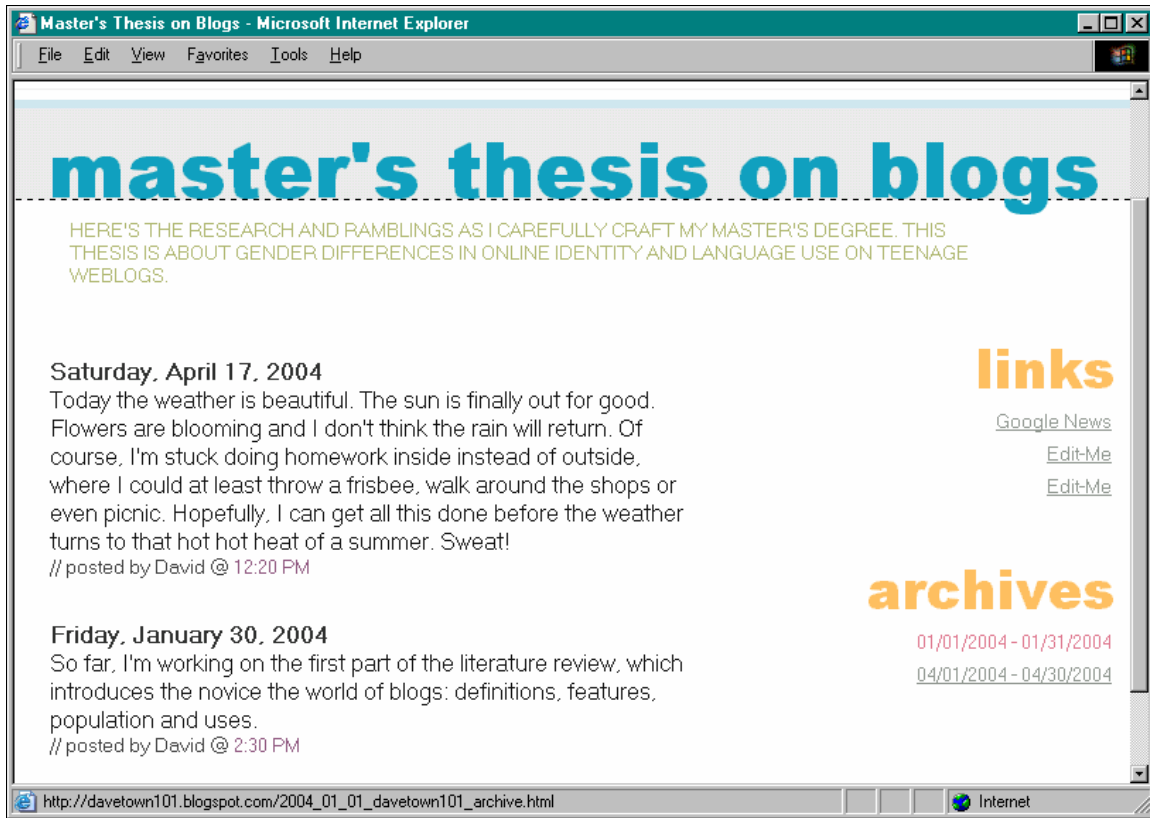
## 2. What is a Blog?

Blogs are personal journals written as a reversed chronological chain of text, images or multimedia, which can be viewed in a web page and are made publicly-accessible on the web (Huffaker, D., 2004a; Winer, 2003). As depicted in *Figure 1*, blogs typically contain text in the form of a “blog post”, offer the ability for readers to comment or provide feedback, contain archives to past blog posts, and link to other blogs and bloggers<sup>2</sup>.

*Figure 1: An Example Blog*

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<sup>2</sup> Except where noted, all examples of blogs were created by the author in order to avoid any privacy or copyright issues.



Blogs are inherently different from personal home web pages. First, bloggers post entries through manual software, such as a web browser, or automatic software, which is downloaded off the Internet and used to instantly publish content to web. Therefore, bloggers do not need to understand HTML or other web programming languages to maintain their blogs. Second, the resulting blog page resembles a personal diary, with entries sorted by time and date, a much stricter format than personal web pages of the past.

## 2.1. Blog Features

David Winer, a fellow at Harvard Law School, considered one of the more visible writers and developers of weblogs, describes some of the more important features of blogs:

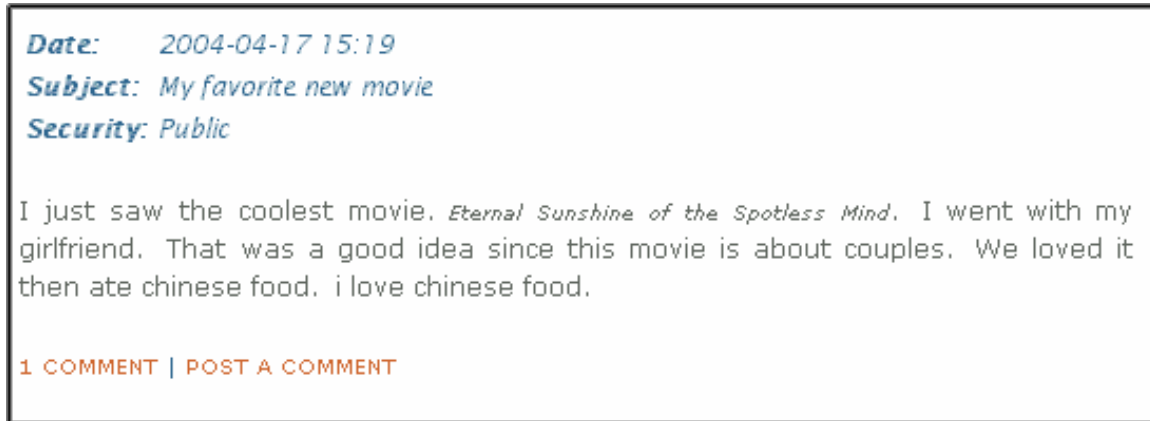
### 2.1.1. Weblog Posts

Weblog posts include a subject title and a body message. Posts can be relatively short in length such as one or two paragraphs, or they could be a long, thoughtful exposé, encompassing a dozen paragraphs. They can be comprised of a variety of media objects, including text, pictures, graphics, or multimedia, and even popular file formats such as *Microsoft Office* documents or *Adobe* PDFs (Winer, 2003). These posts receive a timestamp to denote time and date of the post. *Figure 2* demonstrates the format of a typical blog post.

### 2.1.2. Comments

Readers of a weblog have an opportunity to respond to a blog post, through a comment or feedback link. These comments create a thread as many readers can comment on a single post (Winer, 2003). They contain a timestamp and are viewable to the public. Bloggers can also respond back to reader comments. Figure 2 highlights the comment section. Blog readers can click “Post a Comment” to add a new comment, or “1 Comment” to read previous ones.

*Figure 2: Blog Post with Comment Link*



### 2.1.3. Archives

The front page of a blog contains only a certain amount of posts, sometimes two or three and sometimes twenty. For authors who've maintained their blogs for longer periods of time, they can store past blog posts in an accessible, often searchable archive. As depicted in *Figure 3*, archives can be organized by month, by week, or even by number of posts.

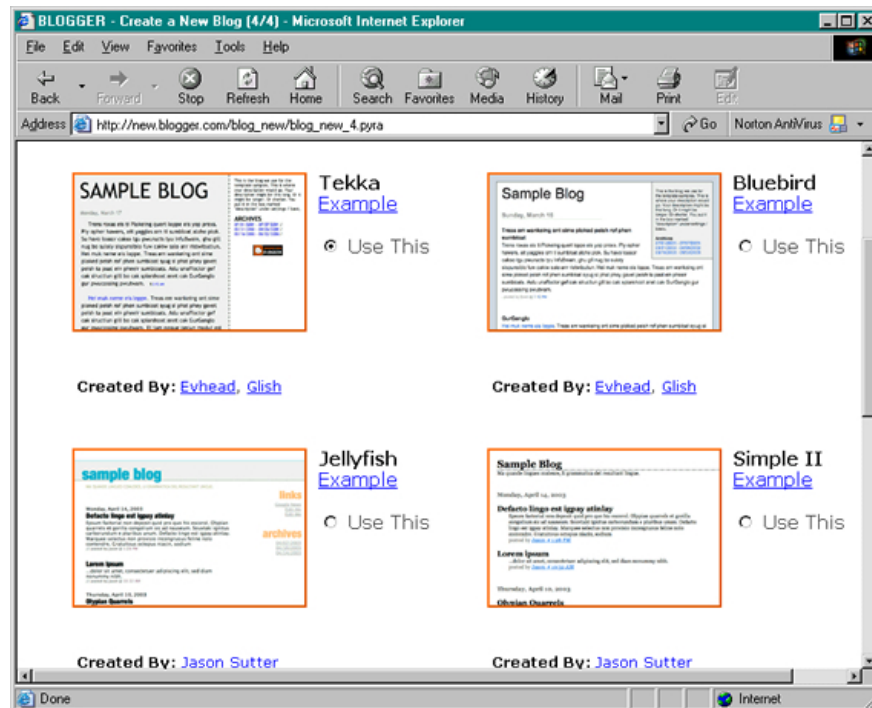
*Figure 3: An Example of Blog Archives*



## 2.1.4. Templates

Another useful feature for web authors is presentation tools that allow pages to be built from preexisting templates. Blog authors can choose from a variety of graphical layouts, typography and color schemes. This allows complete customization and a feeling of personalization for bloggers without any sophisticated technical expertise (Winer, 2003). However, some bloggers like to tinker with a web programming language, to add 3<sup>rd</sup>-party applications or other bells-and-whistles to their blogs, and the capability to reprogram a blog is available. *Figure 4* represents the types of templates Blogger.com, one of the most popular blog-hosted sites, offers.

*Figure 4: Example of Blog Templates*



## 2.2. What is the Blogosphere?

Although some studies suggest the majority of blogs are still highly-personalized venues for self-expression (Herring, Scheidt et al., 2004), many blogs contain links to other bloggers, creating an online community that is often referred to as the *blogosphere*. These blog communities typically share a common purpose or responsibility (Carl, 2003), for example, a group of friends spread out across the world may use blogs as a means to communicate with each other, or a support group might encourage each other's therapeutic development, or a group of amateur journalists might be spreading news on situations of political strife or violent conflict in an area that a global news agency may be unaware of.

The blogosphere also represents the *total population of bloggers*, an Internet culture that is continuing to grow. Several reports and web sites that gather information on blog statistics, which estimate between two and four million blogs, demonstrate the

vastness of the blogosphere; many expect this growth to continue (Henning, 2003; Herring, Scheidt et al., 2004; Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, & Tomkins, 2003). Certainly, the acquisition of population blog software or services within online commercial giants such as *AOL*, *Yahoo* and *Google* suggest that the world may be on the cusp of a blog saturation in Internet culture (Munarriz, 2003; Olsen, 2004; Shirpy, 2003).

### 2.2.1. Size of the Blogosphere

Blogs continue to be created and abandoned each day, so the exact population figures on the size of the blog population remains in transit. The population size is captured using software that indexes blogs or comes directly from sites that host blogs, such as *Livejournal* or *Blogger*. It must also be considered how many blogs are “active”, or updated within the last three months, because many blogs become abandoned (Henning, 2003).

- **Blogcount** (<http://dijest.com/bc/>), a web site dedicated to understanding how vast the weblog community is, collects scholarly and industrial reports that discuss technical and demographic issues, from frequency of blog posts to mapping the blog community. By June of 2003, **Blogcount** estimated there were 2.4 to 2.9 million active weblogs (Greenspan, 2003).
- **BlogCensus**<sup>3</sup> (<http://www.blogcensus.net/>) uses a software program to search and locate weblogs and categorize them by language and authoring tool. As of April 2004, the BlogCensus has indexed 1.83 million blogs and estimates at least 1.21 million of these are active.
- **Livejournal** (<http://www.livejournal.com/>), publishes daily statistics direct from its servers, citing that there are over 2.9 million “livejournals”, with 1.4 million active, as of April 2004<sup>4</sup>.
- **Perseus Development Corporation**, which offers enterprise-level surveys regarding software and technology, recently published a white paper that estimates there are 4.12 million blogs, but at least 2.7 million have been temporarily or permanently abandoned (Henning, 2003).

### 2.2.2. Age and Gender Demographics of the Blogosphere

Most of these surveys suggest that a significant portion of total blog population is made up of teenagers, and almost evenly partitioned between genders. The largest age distribution of bloggers typically range between thirteen and twenty, which assumes most bloggers are either in early secondary school or beginning college or university. There are some subtle discrepancies in gender within the studies listed below; however, the margins are not far enough apart to suggest severe differences in gender use of blogs.

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<sup>3</sup> Blogcensus was developed by the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education (NITLE), a non-profit organization funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> Specific data can be found at <http://www.livejournal.com/stats/stats.txt>

- **Perseus Development Corporation**, for instance, finds blogs are dominated by the youth, with 51.5% of all blogs being developed and maintained by ages 13 – 19. They also find 56% of the *total* bloggers are female and 44% are male (Henning, 2003).
- A recent academic study of 203 randomly-selected weblogs revealed 54.2% male authors and 45.8% female authors, as well as 40.4% of blog authors being under age 20 (Herring, Scheidt et al., 2004).
- Another academic study of 358 randomly selected blogs found 52% male and 48% female total bloggers, and 39% of bloggers are less than 20 years old. However, they also found there are more females than males in the ‘teen’ category (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004).
- **BlogCensus** randomly sampled 490,000 blogs to find 39.8% male and 36.3% female, with the rest of the blogs unidentifiable in terms of gender<sup>5</sup>. Finally,
- **Jupiter Research**<sup>6</sup> found that blogging is split evenly among genders (Greenspan, 2003).

## 2.3. Use of Blogs

Understanding the features of the blogs helps distinguish them from other Internet applications, and grasping the size of the blogosphere signifies the popularity of blogs in Internet culture. The next question involves the content of blogs. What are bloggers writing about? The answer not only provides a context for online community interaction, but possible application for educational technology. These can be divided into five areas: a) Personal blogs; b) Community blogs; c) Journalism blogs; d) Education and research blogs; and e) Knowledge blogs.

### 2.3.1. Personal Blogs

The most popular use of blogs are similar to personal websites authored by individuals, which include chronological posts, as well as links to other web sites or weblogs (Lamshed, Berry, & Armstrong, 2002). Despite the popular notion that weblogs lean toward external events, or remain highly interlinked with the blogosphere, the majority of weblogs are still individualistic self-expressions written by one author (Herring, Scheidt et al., 2004).

### 2.3.2. Community Blogs

Virtual communities develop through the use of a blog (Lamshed et al., 2002). Examples might include a community support group, a site for parents to ask questions and exchange answers, a research community sharing resources and data, or a mirror of

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.blogcensus.net/weblog/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.jup.com/bin/home.pl>

an offline community, like a softball team or neighborhood newsletter. Although personal blogs may dominate the blogosphere, the ability for individuals to choose their level of community participation may be another reason for blog popularity, as it allows the blog author to explore individual needs while benefiting from community interactions (Asyikin, 2003). The linkages with other web sites, people, and ideas even form micro-communities with varying levels of involvement.

### 2.3.3. Journalism Blogs

The idea of alternative forms of journalism manifesting through weblogs has received increasing attention in media and scholarship (Alterman, 2003; Blood, 2003; Lasica, 2003). *Where is Raed?* ([http://dear\\_raed.blogspot.com](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com)), for instance, is a blog by an Iraqi that discusses what is happening in Iraq since September 2003. He discloses a candid view of the U.S. occupation, but also introduces readers to fellow Iraqi bloggers. For most, the global news agency is the only link to international affairs — having personal, subjective commentary within a foreign world provides a unique view to outsiders.

A different, but equally unique is *J-Log*, which provides community critiques and commentary on current journalism and news. The community not only shares interesting news items, but also poses questions such as “Is this news fair and balanced?” Perhaps *J-Log* (<http://www.mallasch.com/journalism/>) and individual reports such as Raed demonstrate new forms of online journalism; critiques, however, as to the viability of these news sources remain an issue, including the resources and references and even the subjectivity amidst objective journalistic philosophy.

A link to <http://blogdex.net/>, a MIT Laboratory experiment that captures the fastest spreading ideas in the blog community, typically results in news headlines as the most contagious information.

### 2.3.4. Education and Research Blogs

Blogs have been heralded as opportunities to promote literacy in learning by allowing students to publish their own writing, whether it’s a journal or story, or even comments on class readings (Kennedy, 2003). For more advanced students, blogs present the same opportunities: writing and thinking with weblogs; archiving and analyzing past knowledge; and developing a social network to collaborate and critique (Mortenson & Walker, 2002).

Blogs allow educators and students to interact in the same common space and format (Wrede, 2003). Lamshed, Berry, and Armstrong (2002) find that students believe blogs are easy to use and navigate, and enthusiastic about learning features such as storing and managing information, communicating, reviewing work before posting, and ‘keeping on track,’ which refers to managing time or monitoring progress (Lamshed et al., 2002). If students are eager to adopt blogs in the classroom, teachers may have an opportunity to also keep on track with students as communication and interactions are visible and accessible anytime-anywhere.

Several sites explore the use of blogs in education. *Weblogg-Ed* (<http://www.weblogg-ed.com/>), maintained by Will Richardson, collects ideas about weblogging in school settings, and facilitates dialogue between teachers. Similarly,

Edublog (<http://edublog.com/>) is an initiative to develop and study blog-based tools for the classroom.

### 2.3.5. Knowledge Blogs

Similar to education and research, blogs provide opportunities for organizations to manage and share content and communication. Dave Pollard, Chief Knowledge Officer at *Ernst and Young, Inc.* and popular writer on the role of blogs in the business, suggests that blogs can be used to store and codify knowledge into a virtual file cabinet. But unlike other content management tools, blogs allow authors to publish in a personal and voluntary way, creating a democratic, peer-to-peer network (Pollard, 2003b). Pollard also suggests companies can increase profitability by designing information architecture to embrace the use of weblogs (Pollard, 2003a, 2003c).

## 3. Verbal, Visual and Digital Literacy

Literacy has always been a focus of learning, especially considering that the foundations of education are grounded in reading and writing. In fact, reading and writing, often referred to as *verbal literacy*, serves as a benchmark for success in education. Reading and writing is not only important in language arts or humanities, they serve as prerequisites for all academic disciplines, including science and mathematics (Cassell, 2004). Verbal literacy is developed even before children enter school as parents read stories to their children, helping them to understand the relationship between words and pictures, as well as to help develop narrative structure (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Huffaker, D., 2004b).

Scholars have recognized how communication also takes place in the form of images and symbols, what is referred to as *visual literacy* (Gee, 2003). As James Paul Glee (2003) suggests, texts are becoming increasingly multimodal, containing both text and images, and can be recognized in everything from the advertisement to the high school textbook (Gee, 2003). Our society is filled with these multimodal symbols, and their coherence is intrinsic for operating in the modern world. Therefore, reading and writing should not only include words but also images, and the development of both *verbal* and *visual* literacy is essential for success inside and outside school walls.

The use of technology represents a third type of literacy, equally ubiquitous and important as the other forms. *Digital literacy*, sometimes referred to as 'technological fluency,' embodies the idea of using technology comfortably, as one would a natural language (Cavallo, 2000). As users of computers and other digital technology become more fluent, they learn to communicate and express themselves explicitly and eloquently using these tools – in effect, technology becomes innate. Furthermore, just as reading and writing are widely hailed as the building blocks for success in society, *digital literacy* becomes necessary for success in the technological world we inhabit.

This is what makes educational technology so exciting — it encourages and advances all three types of literacy: verbal; visual; and digital. Blogs, for example, utilize both textual reading and writing, but also involve the use of graphics in the forms of emoticons, or graphical expressions of emotions, images and multimedia. Blogs also encourage digital literacy, which is grasped from navigating a graphical user interface, and using computers and the Internet in order to publish content.

Some CMC contexts such as email and instant messaging often utilize short pieces of dialog, informal language and even altered words from spoken language (Crystal, 2001). Educators might complain that using these forms in a classroom might reduce literacy skills, as language development is often paired with precision and formality. Blogs might combat this issue, as its medium involves longer written passages and can be contextualized by educators to promote formal language skills.

## 4. Storytelling and Collaboration

Storytelling is a natural part of adolescent development, and children understand the fundamentals of storytelling in their first three years of life (Bransford et al., 1999). Even as a baby, a parent introduces the child to storytelling via bedtime readings or oral tales. By the time a child reaches the age four, he can recall many types of stories, whether fictional or autobiographical (Bransford et al., 1999). The stories develop into more mature narrative as the child gets older; thus, storytelling provides a way for children's language and reading skills to develop (Bransford et al., 1999).

Children advance literacy skills through the practice of telling stories to adults and peers alike (Ryokai, Vaucelle, & Cassell, 2003). With adults, children advance language skills because their partners have even *more* advanced language skills, and children will adapt (Ryokai et al., 2003; Vygotsky, 1980). With peers of similar age groups, children feel more comfortable to collaborate, and enjoy learning together and building on each other's knowledge (Ryokai et al., 2003). Because peer relations remain quite important to children (Bullock, 1998), effective group dynamics and learning also results in prosocial behavior through a sense of ownership, compromise and shared responsibility (Calvert, 1999).

Storytelling does not end in childhood, but continues throughout adolescence and even adulthood. Stories help children and adults alike share experiences and feelings in an engaging, and even entertaining, way (Denning, 2001). From simple sandbox sketches to dinner party yarns, the importance of stories as a catalyst for conversation and dialogue is clear. Furthermore, storytelling helps create connections between people, to engage people, to captivate them. This captivation occurs on both ends — it is just as fun for the teller of the story as the listener. Storytelling fused with peer collaboration is an excellent way to improve language abilities and advance literacy for children and adolescents (Ryokai et al., 2003).

Blogs have the potential to foster both storytelling and collaboration. First, blogs serve as a natural venue for personalized self-expressions. Like diary entries, blogs take form as stories, anecdotes or vignettes, similar to the types of oral and written stories people encounter everyday. This includes past and present activities, feelings about oneself or other people or even hyperbolic or fictitious tales.

Secondly, blogs have technical features that offer the potential to create a dialogue between blog author and blog reader, whether it's a reader response, a question-and-answer sequence or even general brainstorming. In some cases, blog authors discuss candid feelings and readers respond with encouraging statements, providing therapeutic connections. These 'comments' form a chain between the author and readers, and in essence, an online community. Communities are also built as bloggers link to each other, creating a group of storytellers that provide individualistic expressions, as well as interactions with each other.

## 5. Examples of Blogs in Practice

Blogs are just beginning to infiltrate classrooms as educators and school administrators consider blogs as a useful tool for communicating between teachers, schools, students and parents, and as a way to showcase the work of students (Richardson, 2004). These practices are celebrated on the Internet through communities of educators interested in blogging and education. Will Richardson's *Weblogg-ed: Using Weblogs and RSS in Education* web site<sup>7</sup>, for instance, is a useful source of information. His site focuses on best practices, offers a quick start guide for teachers and links to other bloggers concerned with blogs in education. *Edblogger Praxis*<sup>8</sup> is another important web site which unites educators who blog about their experiences or pedagogical philosophies.

This section will look at examples of blogs in practice, separating them into high school (grades 9 – 12), elementary and middle schools (grades 4 – 8) and primary school (grades K – 3) in order to contextualize blog use by age and developmental stage, and to provide useful models for educators and school administrators interested in viewing how blogs work at different levels of the school system.

### 5.1 High School Blogs

Will Richardson is a teacher and Supervisor of Instructional Technology and Communications at *Hunterdon Central Regional High School* in Flemington, New Jersey, USA. He not only initiates school-wide policies for blog use in the classroom, but has found success in using blogs for his own literature and journalism classes. In the literature class, students use blogs to comment and critique on reading assignments. In the journalism class, the students collect news stories to post in their blogs; they also comment on each other's stories while serving in an editorial role. Therefore, in language arts classes, blogs can be used to generate a discussion using critical analysis, or as a collaborative tool where students comment and edit each other's work. For Richardson, blogs help students become more aware of their writing, as well as their audience (Kennedy, 2003). *Figure 5* represents how blogs can be contextualized to provide assignments for students, and allow sections for critique and reflection. Each student has an individual blog, which is linked to a home page where the teacher assigns work and posts relevant news and other information.

*Figure 5. Example of High School Blog*

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.weblogg-ed.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://educational.blogs.com/edbloggerpraxis/>

Journalism 2 at HCRHS: - Microsoft Internet Explorer

Address http://central.hcrhs.k12.nj.us/journ2/

Hunterdon Central | About HC | Alumni | Departments | ETTC | Faculty | Students

**JOURNALISM 2 AT HCRHS** Real stories, real markets

Monday, April 5, 2004


**Reflection**

Read all questions before beginning this reflection. Post to your Weblog by **Wednesday, 11:59 p.m. (I changed this...sorry this was late to be posted. I know...I'm a loser.)** Please put some thought into answering the questions below. I'm interested in effort and honesty...there are no right answers.

1. Discuss the highlights and lowlights of your process in writing your story. I want to know what you learned from your successes and failures. What did you learn about journalism? What did you learn about the process? What did you learn about yourself? Be specific an thorough.
2. Critique your story. What are it's strengths and weaknesses? What did you do well? What, given more time and enthusiasm, would have made it better?
3. What was good and bad about this class? Be honest.
4. What opinions or thoughts do you have about the quality of media and journalism that we get?
5. Write about any other observations about the class or about your experiences here that may be meaningful.

# Posted to the **Daily Dose** Department at 4/5/04; 9:59:39 AM- **Discuss** -

**Pic O' the Day**



**Latest J2 Posts**

**What's Mr. R. Reading?**

- **Starved for Safety.** Now Darfur has erupted into its own civil war and genocide. Mr. Yodi told how a government-backed Arab militia had stopped his truck ?the equivalent of a public bus ?and forced everyone off. The troops let some people on, rubbed sand

**News Directory Mags**

**Looksmart**

**Bloglines**

**NYT Link Generator**

**Homework**

**News Directory: Magazines**

**Mentors**

**Student Sites**

**Meredith** -- Newsless Teens  
**Kate** -- College Communication  
**Jess** -- Teen Depression  
**Matt** -- Online Gaming  
**Devin** -- SAT-less Schools  
**Erica** -- Fit Kids  
**Kristine** -- Sprawl  
**Mallory** -- Local Poverty  
**Kristen** -- Cheerleading

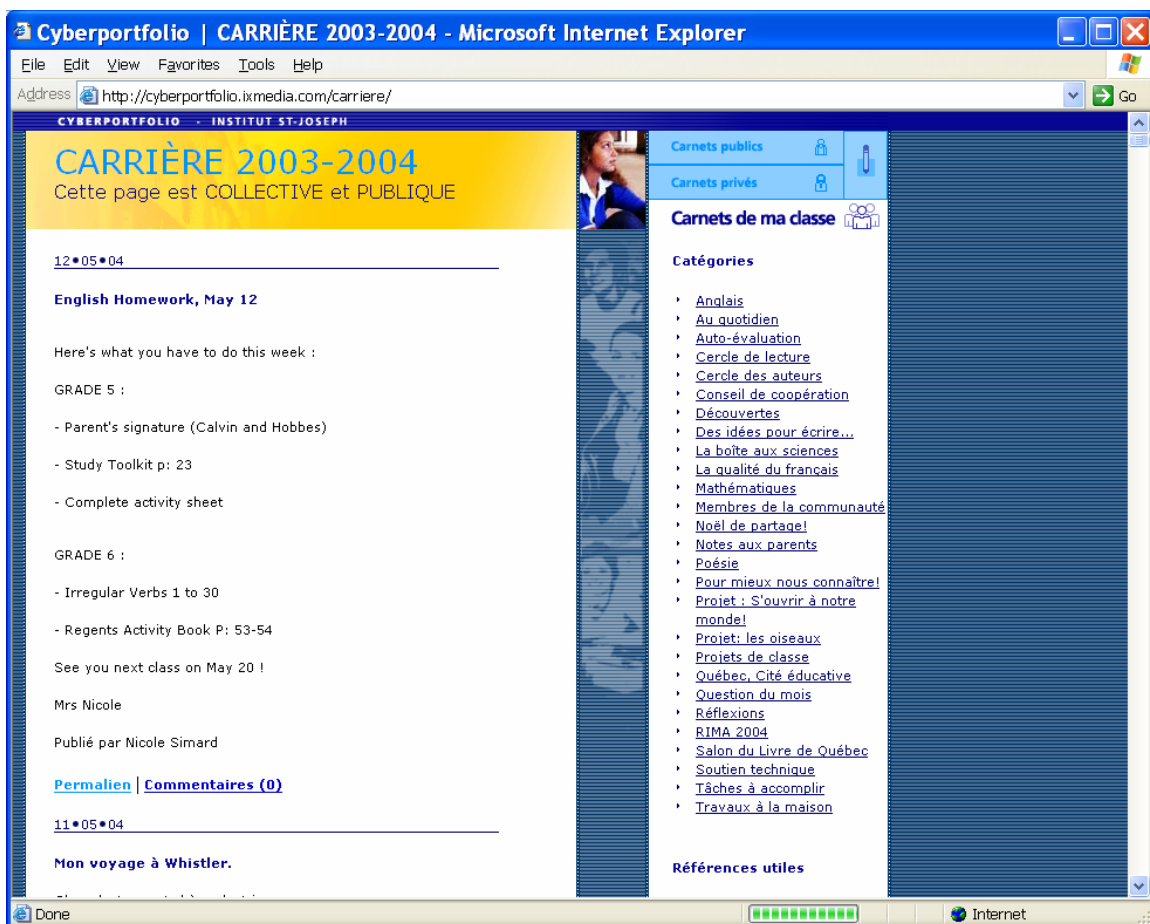
Blogs also help create a community of practice among participating students. They can collaborate with each other and build knowledge. These types of discussions, where ideas are synthesized and news ideas created, may be intrinsic to building critical thinking skills. They may also feel that they are 'part of a team,' and that each individual has a responsibility to contribute in order to achieve success for the group. Again, effective group behavior involves shared ownership, compromise and responsibility, which creates prosocial conduct (Calvert, 1999).

Blogs are accessible to the general public, and Richardson found an important side effect as students began blogging. When the class discussed a new novel, the author of the book accessed the blog and posted an impressive response to the questions students were asking (Richardson, 2004). This may have a profound affect on how students view their own work. For instance, this may give students the impression that their ideas and discussion are important in the real-world, providing a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy. Literature and journalism classes and experts are not the only beneficiaries; political leaders, scientists, artists and philosophers can also directly participate in an educational blog, making students feel their academic work remains valuable, an important consideration for motivating children to learn.

## 5.2 Elementary and Middle School Blogs

Blogs can be utilized in many of the same ways in other grade levels. The *Institut St-Joseph* in Quebec City, Canada, for instance, uses blogs among fifth and sixth graders in order to practice reading and writing<sup>9</sup>. Implemented by the school principal, Mario Asselin, *Institut St-Joseph* bloggers use a software program to write about anything and everything that is school-related. Similar to Richardson's realization, the fact that blog posts are being read by anyone in the world has an acute effect on students. They felt empowered as their blogs received comments from total strangers and even Canadian celebrities (Asselin, 2004). Similar to Will Richardson's work, *Figure 6* portrays a home page blog where projects are assigned and school- or project-related links are provided. Students can comment on homework assignments to the entire class, and still post to their own blog space.

Figure 6. Example of Middle School Blog



At first, some parents and other readers complained that the language of the student blogs were too informal to be considered good writing, and even contained

<sup>9</sup> <http://cyberportfolio.ixmedia.com/carriere/>

misspelling and grammar errors. Critics complained that blogs were teaching improper language skills, so Asselin discussed these challenges with the students. The students came up with a system where each blog post would be reviewed by students and a graphic would be posted alongside the text, which served as a 'stamp of approval.' Suddenly, student writing improved dramatically, as no student wanted mistakes after insisting their quality of writing was excellent (Asselin, 2004).

Similarly, Anne Davis' *Newsquest* involves 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> graders who practice writing by commenting on news and events. Students felt that blogging helped them write better stories, extend their vocabulary, and even feel 'grown up' knowing their voice is on the Internet<sup>10</sup>. After a period of working with blogs, these students began to collaborate with Will Richardson's high school journalists, forming the *Georgia-NJ Connection* blog. Now older journalists and younger journalists can share ideas, comments, and critiques. Again, this resonates with Vygotsky's notions that children will adapt to more advanced language skills observed in adults (Ryokai et al., 2003; Vygotsky, 1980). *Figure 7* demonstrates how blog information can be scaled down to reach a younger audience.

*Figure 7. Example of Elementary School Blog*



<sup>10</sup> <http://www.schoolblogs.com/NewsQuest/>

## 5.4 Primary School

Mrs. Dudiak's second grade class at *Oakdale Elementary School* in Maryland, USA, uses blogs to create writing assignments for her students. She might use a picture, such as a waterfall and ask students to write a description, a story, or poetry. She also asks them to discuss favorite books, what 'types' of books and stories they like, as well as depictions of books into a "movie in our head" and students reply in the comment section of the blog<sup>11</sup>. This is an excellent example of how blogs can be placed in specific contexts to meet the goals of classroom curriculum. *Figure 8* exemplifies how blogs can be simplified to reach even the youngest students. Changing colors, enlarging texts, and contextualizing material to reach the needs to primary students represent easy changes for educators to make.

*Figure 8. Example of Primary School Blog*



*Lewis Elementary School* in Portland, Oregon, USA uses a blog to showcase K – 5 student work, as well as post important information and news for parents<sup>12</sup>. For instance, photo galleries of art work are displayed alongside weekly classroom notes

<sup>11</sup> <http://mrsd.tblog.com/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://lewiselementary.org/>

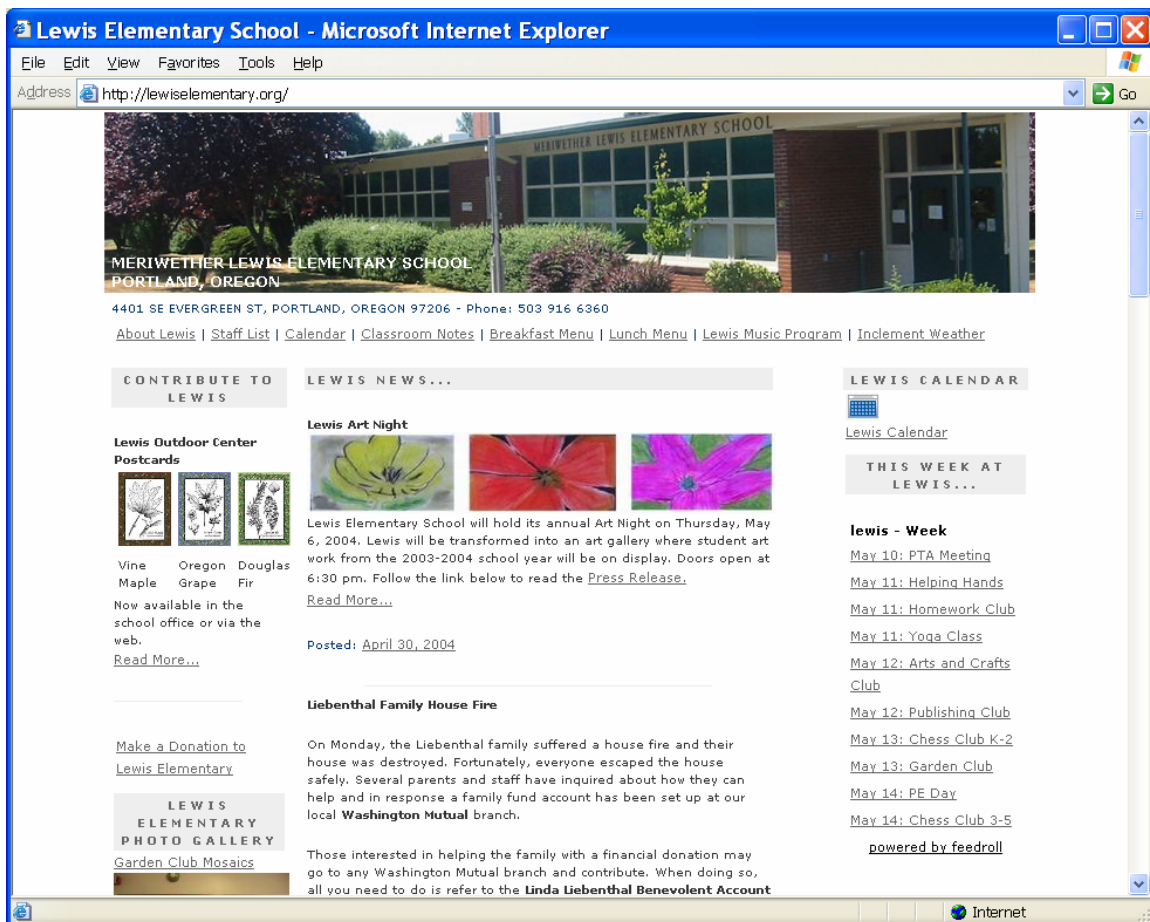
from each teacher. This demonstrates how blogs can not only be effective in practicing and advancing writing and language skills, but also in communicating between teachers, students and parents. Blogs may give parents more direct exposure to their children's school life, and thus, more opportunities to have an impact on their children's learning. *Little Miami Schools*<sup>13</sup> in Morrow, Ohio, USA, also uses a blog to communicate school goals and news, as well as spotlighting the successes of its students and teachers.

In sum, blogs can be used at a variety of age and grade levels to promote reading and writing skills, as well as provide communication links between students, parents, teachers and schools. Students can use blogs on their own, finding stories or news they find interesting as demonstrated with the classes of Mr. Richardson and Mr. Asselin, or they can have specific assignments designed by the teacher as seen in the case of Mrs. Dudiak's class. Furthermore, schools can use blogs to bridge the links between students, teachers and parents, making demonstration of work and student progress available, as well as schools news and schedules. *Figure 9* demonstrates how blogs can be used as a central communication hub for teacher, schools, parents and students to share information.

*Figure 9. Example of Blog as Communication Hub for Teachers, Schools and Parents*

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.littlemiamischools.com/>



The next section will address some of the issues and considerations for educators interested in implementing blogs in their schools and classrooms.

## 6. Issues and Considerations

### 6.1 School and District-wide Considerations

This chapter has mainly approached blog implementation from the educator perspective. However, it is important to examine the schools and districts that encompass the individual classroom. Not only do school and district administrators remain an intrinsic part to choosing educational technology initiatives, but their choices can have a positive or negative effect on how these choices become applied. For instance, schools and districts have to work within a budget when making choices for technology. Second, they have to choose which hardware and software *standards* will be equitable across the community. Finally, they have to implement technology within certain ethical, legal and security issues.

For each of these considerations, blogs still stand as a viable solution. First, most blog software is free and open-sourced, so administrators can host blogs within local technology infrastructure. Second, blogs are delivered via the web, so standards have already been established—blogs can be implemented anywhere a computer and Internet

accessibility is present. Finally, blogs have the option of being available to the public or private, an important consideration which will be discussed in the next section.

In sum, the importance of school and district-wide influence on educational technology implementation cannot be ignored. However, for the same reasons blogs can be a useful tool and practical solution for educators, administrators should also be impressed.

## **6.2 Issues of Online Privacy**

A key concern for any educator and school system involves student privacy. Cyberstalking or sexual predation is a serious concern for adolescents using the Internet (Earley, 1999; Gilbert, 1995). Many of the blog-hosts offer free web space available to the public Internet; information on a blog is publicly-accessible. If the content of blogs or identities of students need to remain anonymous or private to the world, blog software and hosts offer other options.

For instance, free blog-hosts such as LiveJournal offer a “Friend’s Only” option which involve a username and password for entrance. For even more security, blog software such as MoveableType, which can be implemented on local school web servers, can remain completely in-house; i.e. no one outside of school or classroom computers would even have access to the blogs.

While privacy is an important consideration for educators and school administrators, the counter-argument to keeping blogs private would be that making blogs available to the world might generate feedback that will empower bloggers and further develop communication and collaboration. For example, if a classroom is discussing a science project and a professional scientist participates in the discussion, it would add significant value to the learning experience.

## **6.3 Setting Context**

One of the primary challenges for using blogs, as with many technologies, in the classroom is the importance of setting a context for learning to occur. While discovery and creativity does abound when adolescents are allowed freedom to explore these CMC venues, some structure needs to be in place to facilitate a learning outcome. For instance, if writing quality is a concern for a teacher, then contextualizing the language to focus on clear and succinct writing skills is a must. Similarly, students have to be encouraged to use the blog on a steady basis, and focus on the classroom material.

In sum, contextualizing blogs to the learning experience will serve to produce more exciting and educational blog experiences in the classroom, experiences that parents, administrators and students alike can observe and reflect upon.

The next section will provide some recommendations for educators interested in implementing blogs in the classroom to promote literacy and learning.

## 7. Recommendations

### 7.1. Use free blog software for easy implementation in the classroom.

There are several popular web sites that provide templates, maintenance and hosting of blogs. Using free blog software makes it an easier decision for educators and school administrators concerned with school budgets and technology requirements. With a computer and an Internet connection, blogs can be set up in minutes. For educators who want to keep blogs inaccessible to the public, most blog-hosts offer the opportunity to password-protect blogs. The most popular blog-hosts are listed below.

- LiveJournal: <http://www.livejournal.com>
- BlogSpot: <http://www.blogspot.com>
- Xanga: <http://www.xanga.com>
- MoveableType: <http://www.moveabletype.org>
- T-Blog: <http://www.tblog.com>

For those who want to implement the blogs on local school servers, there are open source applications such as *MoveableType* and *phpBB* which can be altered and used in any expected capacity, although they have technical requirements (documentation will be available on these sites).

Open-source applications such as *MoveableType* and *phpBB* allow complete customization of the interface and blog application. So educators should feel that blogs can be completely tailored to suit the needs of students and the affordances and constraints of school district policy. The examples of blogs used in this chapter are presented to demonstrate current applications and serve as a baseline for new ideas and implementation. Educators should feel complete flexibility in redesigning blog software for learning experiences.

### 6.2 Fuse emergent learning with curriculum-based assignments.

If given the opportunity, students might begin to navigate their own learning paths, a feature which is recommended by the new science of learning as directed by the National Research Council, USA (Huffaker, D. A. & Calvert, 2003). Surely, letting students do as they want with blogs will reveal some interesting trends that could be manipulated into important learning opportunities. However, it may be a better idea to create a hybrid form where students construct their own learning, as well as assignments that teachers feel aid the curriculum. Therefore, students have some flexibility in exploring the medium of blogs, while teachers provide direction and structure in the educational practice.

### 6.3 Encourage collaboration.

Blogs have great potential as a collaborative environment. As students read and write, they may comment and critique each other's work. They may even edit each other's work. Assignments can be created where students have to work as a team to complete the goals, such as a story "train," or chain of story parts devised by individual

students, or literature critiques of different parts of a book, or even a mix of different perceptions on the same experience.

#### **6.4 Develop a system for rating student work before it is published.**

One way to maintain the caliber of writing that is expected in formal writing is to create a way to ‘proof’ student work before it goes into the public. Most blogs contain a *preview* area before publication takes place. The teacher does not necessarily need to be the final editor — students can edit each other’s work and provide the final ‘stamp of approval’ before the world sees the writing. This may be more difficult at early ages, but the metaphor provides accountability for students, which the *Institut St-Joseph* found dramatically improved writing quality (Asselin, 2004).

#### **6.5 Create interactions between students and the outside world.**

One way to make students feel their work is valuable is to demonstrate how their words are being read outside the classroom. For instance, if parents or even total strangers provide feedback on student work, children and adolescents might become more aware of their writing, as well as their audience (Richardson, 2004). Perhaps even more empowering involves experts such as authors, poets, artists, scientists, engineers, or other professionals who may comment on student work or add to the discussion. These linkages are not only useful for learning and achievement, but are not difficult tasks to achieve when using blogs, especially considering their accessibility by the public sphere.

#### **6.6 Link with other educational blogs.**

As exemplified in the *Georgia-NJ Connection*, students using blogs may connect with other classrooms despite geographic constraints, in order to expand the community of practice. Even regardless of age, students can share with other students, providing an online learning community that may become self-motivating and self-sustaining. Blogs provide an easy way to do this with built-in options for linking to other blog communities.

#### **6.7 Get parents involved in reading and participating with blogs.**

As previously mentioned, getting parents to provide feedback to student work may be an excellent way for students to feel their work is valuable and even appreciated. Yet this has a two-fold benefit — parents may feel they have more exposure to, and thus, more interaction with, their children’s learning. Therefore, both students and parents benefit.

Furthermore, blogs can provide links between schools, classrooms, teachers, students and parents. Parents who visit a classroom blog may encounter the latest third grade arts and crafts and see what the latest school news or what is for lunch that day. This helps bridge communication between all parties responsible for educating children and adolescents.

Creating linkages between all the classrooms in the school creates an interwoven community where everyone feels connected and accessible. This community of practice may have a paramount effect on increasing the efficiency and success of learning in K-12 educational settings.

## 8. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to demonstrate how blogs can be a useful tool for promoting literacy in the K-12 classroom. Literacy most noticeably takes form in reading and writing, but *visual literacy* as well as *digital literacy* may be just as important for success in education and beyond school walls (Cassell, 2004; Cavallo, 2000; Gee, 2003). As an Internet technology, blogs involve the reading and writing of texts, but also the creation and interpretation of images and multimedia, as well as the need to navigate a graphical user interface, all of which serve to advance skills in verbal, visual and digital literacy.

Storytelling, a natural part of children's language development, serves as a catalyst for promoting literacy (Bransford et al., 1999; Huffaker, D., 2004b). Children and adults alike use stories to express thoughts, feelings and experiences in an engaging and entertaining way (Denning, 2001), and storytelling helps create collaborations between the teller and listener. Collaborations, whether between children and adults or among peers, are also important aspects of learning, producing ways to adapt or scaffold learning (Ryokai et al., 2003; Vygotsky, 1980). Blogs, which resemble personal journals, create a perfect environment for sharing stories and other forms of writings, and provide ways for others to participate through feedback or critique on student work.

Currently, blogs in practice highlight that blogs can be used in a broad range of age groups and developmental stages in education. Second graders and high school teenagers alike can use blogs to practice reading and writing, and help develop language skills. Blogs can also be used in a variety of disciplines, from literature and journalism to arts and sciences. Anywhere language is used to promote discussion, blogs serve as an arena where thoughts can be published and made available to everyone for additional feedback. Not only can *students* use the blogs, teachers, parents and experts can collaborate alongside them, which may help develop a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy for children and adolescents.

Finally, this chapter has recommended several concepts for educators interested in implementing blogs in the classroom. These concepts embrace collaboration, online community building, interlinking parents with schools, student accountability, and ways to monitor student progress. Because blogs are readily available for free at a selection of blog-hosts, implementation into the class does not require a high level of technical expertise or an extravagant school budget. Therefore, the benefits of advancing language skills or bridging communication between teachers, parents and schools far outweigh the costs.

'Let *them* blog' is a simple idea — blogs provide a computer-mediated communication context where students can practice and advance different types of literacy, use storytelling to express themselves, and collaborate with peers and adults as they complete assignments. '*Letting* them blog' is even simpler — blogs are easy-to-use, free and extremely accessible for anyone with a computer and Internet access. Teachers may find blogs to be one of the easiest educational technology applications to implement, and since adolescents are already using blogs outside the classroom, it may be an excellent time to connect the two.

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